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AUTHOR Bannister, Linda
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ABSTRACT

In the act of revision a writer seeks what Joyce Carol Oates calls "points of invisibility": things not in the text that should be and things in the text that should not be. Composing process research on revision has articulated several aspects of the revising process, but study of creative writers' composing habits remains an under-utilized source of advice for student writers. Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Oates, three writers whose revision stories are particularly convincing, speak of writing and writing practice in ways that composition theorists typically refer to as feminine. All three mention questions and answers, dialog, and connection as a means to discover what they want to say. So heavily do Morrison, Oates, and Tan rely on the dialogic exchange among text, character and reader, that they would perhaps be unable to write without it. The body of feminist theory that points at dialog, "connected knowing," and interrelationship as distinctly female ways of knowing reflects these writers' composing processes and also suggests a model of revision that creates opportunities for student writers to converse with their writing. This conversation-based heuristic asks a writer to read her text as dialog, to conflate writing, reading, and speaking, so that the text becomes newly visible and therefore changeable. Such a heuristic can be applied to a text as a whole, to the characters or ideas that live in that text, or to the text's intended audience. (A sample conversation-based heuristic handout is attached. (Contains 30 references.) (SAM)

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Linda Bannister
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA 90045
CCCC 1993

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Three Women Revise: What Morrison, Oates and Tan Can Teach Our Students about Revision

"Self-criticism is an art not many are qualified to practice. Despite our best efforts it is problematic that, apart from the most immediate, practical, technical revisions, the writer's effort to detach himself from his work, let alone his *oeuvre*, is quixotic: knowing too much may be a way of knowing too little; or conversely, how can we know more about ourselves than we know about anything else? In the human eye no light energy can stimulate the retina at the exit of the optic tract: all human beings carry blind spots with them in their vision" (Oates 1988, 33).

Joyce Carol Oates is speaking here of the points of invisibility encountered by anyone who is being self-reflective. She argues that because these points are invisible, they cannot be seen, even as absence. Revising writing is surely one of the most difficult self-reflective activities human beings undertake. The act of revision is one during which a writer seeks what Oates call points of invisibility--those things which are not there in the text, but should be; and those things which are in the text, but should not be. The paradox is that these elements, whether absent or present, are often invisible to the writer. Revision becomes then, an effort to really see the text. The assumption here is that somewhere, in the

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writer's mind and/or on the page, the "real" text, the "intended" text, the "best possible" text, exists. The inchoate form, the unrevised form, is not wholly present or is present in a dissonant state.

Composing process research on revision has articulated several aspects of the revising process, revealing its recursiveness (Sommers 1980), its unfortunate superficiality, particularly among student writers (Pianko, 1979) and how easy detection of error is relative to diagnosis of conceptual problems in the text (Flower, et al. 1986). Research has also shown that even minimal instruction (Wallace and Hayes, 1991) can produce a significant increase in global revision if the instruction is contextualized or task specific. Other research has demonstrated that revision doesn't guarantee progress, success or quality in writing, and in fact, can even work against it (Perl 1979). Despite the tremendous interest in and attention given to revision by composing process researchers, much about the process remains mysterious, "invisible." Like the "unseeing" student writer facing her text, the means whereby writers effectively revise is still in large part "invisible" to writing researchers, who struggle to <u>see</u> what happens during this critical process. The study of the methods of creative writers, through examination of their notes, journals, letters and commentaries, and interviews of writers about their composing habits and theories of writing is an especially rich source of information, a source under-utilized as advice for student writers. A working assumption is that gifted writers somehow see more <u>of</u> and <u>in</u> their texts;

less of their writing remains invisible to their keener eyes. They can see more, thus their texts may be re-viewed more completely, revised to more nearly approach the author's intended vision. This assumption shatters, of course, the dream of the sacred text, of "language set down with such talismanic precision, such painstaking ardor, such will, it can never be altered; language that constitutes an indissoluble reality of its own--human in origin but more-than-human in essence" (Oates 1988, 41). The fact that gifted professional writers revise so repeatedly argues effectively against the sacred text myth. More importantly, the rigor of professional revision gives students an enlightened understanding of the necessary evolution of their own texts, helping to debunk their notions that texts should somehow spring forth, fully formed and perfect.

Thus one essential difference between the experienced writer and the student writer is the ability to see more, to know more about a text, and to control the uses of that knowledge. Linda Flower calls this knowledge "metaknowledge--knowing what you know." Because, she goes on to say, "there are not simple rules for managing rhetorical problem-solving, expert writers often depend on meta-awareness of their own strategies and options. This knowledge is what lets writers rise above individual tasks, review their options, and consider what they might do in the face of a problem. It lets writers manage their own composing process" (Flower 1989).

The first step on the road to metaknowledge for student writers is the

awareness of revision as often a lengthy and global process, whereby texts are truly re-seen. Before any revision strategies are recommended, before any heuristics are dispensed, students need to become familiar with revision stories told by writers they know and admire.

Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, and Amy Tan are three writers whose revision stories are particularly convincing. Morrison speaks of revising "all the time, all the way to the printer" (Cooper-Clark 200) and of her books in "pieces like a broken mirror" that she goes back to and entirely restructures (Ruas 220). Oates speaks of being infatuated with the art of revision, of revising tirelessly, monomaniacally (Showalter 46). "My reputation for writing quickly and effortlessly notwithstanding, I am strongly in favor of intelligent, even fastidious revision, which is, or certainly should be, an art in itself" (Phillips 365). She goes on to report that there are "pages in recent novels that I've rewritten as many as seventeen times, and a story, "The Widows," which I revised both before and after publication in The Hudson Review, and then revised again before I included it in my next collection of stories--a fastidiousness that could go on into infinity" (Phillips 366). Amy Tan calls herself "not an ecologically sound writer"; she figured out that she went through 7,000 sheets of paper writing The Joy Luck Club (Somogyi and Stanton 32). She also tells a marvelous story about the genesis of her second book, The Kitchen God's Wife. She speaks of writing her second book, "or rather, my second books. For example, I wrote 88 pages of a book about the daughter of

a scholar, who accidently kills a magistrate with a potion touted to be the elixir of immortality. I wrote 56 pages of a book about a Chinese girl orphaned during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. I wrote 95 pages about a young girl who lives in northeast China during the 1930's with her missionary parents. I wrote 45 pages about using English to revive the dead language of Manchu and the world it described on the plains of Mongolia. I wrote 30 pages about a woman disguised as a man who becomes a sidewalk scribe to the illiterate workers of Chinatown during the turn of the century...the outtakes must now number close to 1000 pages...[but] I wrote with persistence, telling myself that no matter how bad the story was, I should simply go on like a rat in a maze, turning the corner when I arrived at it. And so I started to write another story, about a woman who was cleaning a house, the messy house I thought I should be cleaning. After 30 pages, the house was tidy, and I had found a character I liked. I abandoned all the pages about the tidy house. I kept the character and took her along with me to another house. I wrote and then rewrote six times another 30 pages, and found a question in her heart. I abandoned the pages and kept the question and put that in my heart" (Tan 6-7).

The processes that led Morrison, Oates and Tan to a truer vision of their texts, were of course, unique. Though these writers are all female, their ethnicities and experiences, styles and themes, vary widely. It might be expected that their revision strategies are equally disparate. Surprisingly, however, each talks about

certain aspects of their composing with unanimity. This may be due, at least in part, to what linguists Julia Penolope and Susan Wolfe call an epistemological difference between "patriarchal" and "female" modes of writing. Building on the work of Carol Gilligan, they argue that "patriarchal expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of categories, dichotomies, roles, hierarchies, [while] female expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships" (Osborn 258). Walter Ong calls masculine rhetoric a rational expression of "ceremonial combat, focused on defending a position or attacking the position of another." Nancy Chodorow suggests women are less concerned with winning and more interested in how well they relate and connect with others (Osborn 259). Therefore, perceiving continuities rather than dichotomies or hierarchies, and assuming cooperative rather than agonistic postures are theorized as feminine writing characteristics, in both process and product.

I think gender <u>is</u> an important factor in writing, and that it accounts for some of the commonalities among these three writers, particularly regarding their composing processes.

When drafting <u>and</u> revision are acknowledged as integral parts of an organic, recursive, interconnected process, then we may characterize that view of composing as feminine. In fact, Elizabeth Flynn, Susan Osborn and others have described late twentieth century composition pedagogy, a process-based

pedagogy, as feminine for precisely that reason (Osborn). In an article describing various professional writers' metaphors for revision, Barbara Tomilinson assembles examples of distinctly masculine and feminine writing approaches, though she does not characterize them as such (Tomlinson 1988). It is important to note that both men and women writers use both masculine and feminine approaches, but degree and frequency of use does seem related to gender. That is, men use masculine approaches more often than women do and women use feminine approaches more than men do.

Morrison, Oates and Tan all speak of writing and writing practice in what might be called "feminine" ways. It is in these remarkable points of confluence that a viable heuristic for revision is found. Oates has maintained that "when the writer is alone...with language," she experiences herself as genderless (Showalter 46). But she also says that the woman who writes "is a woman by others' definitions," and that that fact inevitably influences composing.

In descriptions of their composing processes, Morrison, Oates and Tan have all mentioned similar approaches to writing and used similar language to reveal what is important to them as writers. All three mention questions and answers, dialog, and connection as a means to discover what they want to say. They see themselves in conversation, in conversation with their texts, their characters and their readers in order to discover what they really want to write, in order to see their text more completely. Toni Morrison describes the pattern of her writing as

a back and forth, a response cycle. "I always know the ending of my novels because that's part of the idea, part of the theme. It doesn't shut, or stop there. That's why the endings are multiple endings. That's where the meaning rests; that's where the novel rests. For me, it's also the closest way I can get to what informs my art, which is the quality of response. [It's like] being in church, and knowing the function of the preacher is to make you get up, you do say yes, and you do respond back and forth...both by meddling in the action and responding to it, like the musical experience of participation in church" (Ruas 224-25). In an interview, Morrison speaks of her writing as parallel to the spiritual storytelling tradition in church. "The point was to tell the same story again and again. I can change it if I contribute to it when I tell it. People who are listening comment on it and make it up, too, as it goes along. In the same way when a preacher delivers a sermon, he really expects his congregation to listen, participate, approve, disapprove, and interject almost as much as he does" (McKay 421). That's what writing is like. And in another interview Morrison says the function of language is not to shut out the reader or even to say only what she means. "The function of language is to drop down...it's to hold and maintain this experience that I, as a writer, and the reader, have. The intimacy must never be broken..." (Cooper-Clark 200). In a videotaped conversation with Bill Moyers she asserts "all the books are questions for me. I write them because I don't know something. [The primary role of the novel] is about stretching. You see something. Somebody takes a cataract

away from your eye...you feel larger, connected. Something of substance you have encountered connects with another experience...I want [the reader] to work with me in the book...I don't describe Pilate a lot in Song of Solomon. She's tall and she wears these ear things and she says less than people think...I wanted to communicate the clarity, not of my vision, but of a vision so that she belongs to whoever's envisioning her in the text. And people can say, 'Oh, I know her. I know who that is. She is...' and they fill in the blank because they have invented her" (Moyers 59-63). And in an article discussing how she wants readers as active participants in her art, Morrison says "my compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree upon beforehand. I don't want to assume or exercise that kind of authority...the text, if it is to take improvisation and audience participation into account, cannot be the authority---it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader to participate in the tale..." (Morrison 1984, 388-89).

Joyce Carol Oates writes that "the secret at the heart of all creative activity has something to do with our desire to complete a work, to impose perfection upon it, so that, hammered out of profane materials, it becomes sacred: which is to say, no longer merely personal...to begin a new work invariably involves extraordinary effort but after while--weeks, months; if one is fortunate, only days--it acquires its own rhythm, its own unmistakable 'voice'; it begins as we so clumsily say, to 'write itself.' As if any text has ever 'written itself' except by way

of the effort of the writer...drop by drop by precious drop, his or her blood draining into it" (Oates 43). And in an interview she reports falling "into a kind of waking sleep, a day-dreaming conversation with the people, the strangers, who are to be the 'characters' in a story or a novel I will be writing. At times my head seems crowded; there is a kind of pressure inside it, almost a frightening physical sense of confusion, fullness, dizziness. Strange people appear in my thoughts and define themselves slowly to me...I am not free of them, really, and I can't force them into situations they haven't themselves willed...private dreams have no interest for other people; the dream must be made public" (Oates 21, 30). Oates repeatedly mentions her writing writing itself, her characters determining their own voices through waking dreams during which they talk with her. She calls herself a "writer who hopes to reach out to a reader...to a single reader at a time," to move out of self-absorption into relationship (Sjoberg 365). Oates' commitment, via her writing, she says, is to not simply write for her own sake, but to speak to others (Sjoberg 362).

And you'll recall Amy Tan's vivid description of the many characters and stories she wrote into being until she found a question in one character's heart, which became a question in her own heart. Tan says that as she writes "each page of [a] book can change the whole rest of the book...[a book is] questions in the shape of a story" (Somogyi and Stanton 32). She often speaks of beginning with a question. "First there's a question, and often it takes a long time for the

question to surface out of false starts" (Somogyi and Stanton 28). She dialogs with her characters to see what she really wants to say. "I find myself asking, why is she (my character) telling me this story? And she [my character] answered back: 'Of course I'm crabby! I'm talking, talking, talking, no one to talk to. Who's listening? And I realized: a story should be a gift. She [my character] needs to give her story to someone" (Tan 7). With that answer, Amy Tan solved the problem of The Kitchen God's Wife, in which Winnie gives the story of her life to her daughter Pearl. Not surprisingly, Tan reads her text aloud as she writes, over and over again, 12 to 20 times per page (Somogyi and Stanton 32). In this way, reading as speaking, she discovers the true rhythms of the text.

Morrison, Oates and Tan all describe conversations, dialogs, connections forged with their texts, characters and readers. They use a question and answer format, an exchange of language to discover their texts as they write. This back and forth movement, this alternating flow of feeling and information, is crucial to all three in the process of writing and revising. Their texts become "less invisible" as a result, become more nearly complete, become more clearly each author's vision. Indeed, we might speculate that without the dialogic exchange, with text, character and reader, Oates, Morrison and Tan would be unable to write.

Dialogic theories of language use are, of course, nothing new. We need only look to Mikhail Bakhtin, Vygotsky or Carl Rogers. The body of feminist theory that points at dialog, "connected knowing" (alá Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and

Tarule) and interrelationship as distinctly female ways of knowing is very familiar. Three gifted woman writers, Morrison, Oates and Tan, are univocal about the necessity of constructing a variety of dialogs throughout their composing processes. All of this points to the benefits of a dialog or conversation-based model of revision for student writers. I would like to offer such a model here. It is based on an author-constructed conversation with a text, with the "characters" or ideas that "people" that text, and with the readers of that text. I have prepared a handout that outlines my heuristic, but in brief it creates opportunities for student writers to converse with their writing. The results of that talk are often revealing. Through dialog, writers illuminate their blind spots, seek and find the points of invisibility in a text, begin to see those things which are not there, but should be, and those things which are and should not be. This conversation-based heuristic asks a writer to read her text as dialog, to conflate writing, reading and speaking, so the text is newly visible and therefore changeable. It turns on the simple principle that as writers we cannot respond to, cannot change what we cannot see.

Toni Morrison says, "writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being

aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability" (Morrison 1992, xi).

Linda Bannister
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA 90045
CCCC 1993

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A Conversation-based Heuristic

The heuristic that follows is a simple series of five questions that can be given to students in the form of a handout or read aloud. The questions can be applied to a text as a whole, to the characters or ideas that live in that text or to the text's intended audience — simultaneously or sequentially. The key feature of the heuristic is that the questions and their responses should be recorded by students in dialog form. I suggest two columns, one for the questions and one for the responses. The responses should be allowed to generate further questions — as is the case in real-life conversation. Once these "new" or student-created questions have been exhausted, the student can always return to the original sequence. Here then, are the questions:

Reader (Questions)	**Text/Idea/Audience (Responses)**
1. Where does the text name itself? [In other words, where is it made clear what the text is about, where is the text identified?] *Or, where does the idea name itself? Or, where does the audience name itself?*	My name is _____.
2. Where does the text validate its name? *Or, where does the idea or audience validate itself?*	I validate my name in line x, when I say _____.
3. Where does the text undermine its name? *Or, where does the idea or audience undermine its name?*	I undermine my name in line x, when I say _____.
4. Where do I see my "name" (self) in this text? [In other words, where does who I am jive with this text, or where are my experiences/beliefs similar?] *Or, where do I see my "name" (self) in this text?*	The reader's "name" is in line x, where it says _____.
5. Where do I see my "name" (self) in conflict with this text? *Or, where do I see my "name" (self) in conflict with this idea or with this audience?*	The reader's "name" is in conflict with line x, where it says _____.

Once the student has recorded the dialog with the text (or its idea(s) or its audience(s)), the text should be more visible. This heightened visibility should suggest revisions that help the text more nearly approach the writer's intention(s).

*Note: This heuristic can also be used for critical reading of texts produced by others.

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